

Guide to Filing Non-Prisoner Complaints Without a Lawyer In Federal District Court

Introduction

Welcome to the federal district courts.

This Guide is intended to help you write and file a complaint. Follow these steps and your litigation should run more smoothly.

The Guide comes with two attachments:

Attachment 1 is a blank form for your complaint and an optional blank application to proceed in court without prepaying the filing fee. You are encouraged to use the form complaint. You are not required to do so, but using it will help your case move more quickly.

Attachment 2 contains examples of claims. These illustrations may help you write your own claim.

Before you begin, consider whether your case belongs in federal court.

- Federal district courts generally hear two types of cases: (1) violations of federal law; and (2) violations of state law where the parties are citizens of different states and the amount at stake is more than \$75,000.
- Federal district courts do not review the decisions of state courts. Do not sue in a federal district court just because you are unhappy with the ruling of a state court.

Contents of Your Complaint

Cases in federal court start with the complaint, and so does this guide. The complaint is an important legal document. If you draft it correctly, it will be short and tell the court and defendants how your rights were violated.

What to put in your complaint:

Your complaint needs five things. These five parts correspond to the five sections that you see in the form complaint in Attachment 1.

- A. **Caption and parties.** Your complaint must begin with a “caption.” The caption must include your name as the plaintiff and the names of the people you are suing (the defendants). (If the defendants harmed you while doing their jobs, tell the court the name and address of the employers, if known to you.) Also, name the federal court in which you will be filing your complaint. Do not fill in the case number. This will be done by the clerk when you file your complaint. From then on, you should put the case number on papers that you file with the court. This helps the court keep all the papers in each case together.

- B. **Statement of Claim.** The most important part of your complaint is the “statement of your claim.” Describe *briefly* the exact problem that you are complaining about. You should explain five things:
 - (1) **Who** violated your rights. Tell the name of each person who injured you.
 - (2) **What** each defendant did. Tell what action each defendant took or failed to take that harmed you.
 - (3) **When** they did it. Tell when each defendant harmed you.
 - (4) **Where they did it.** Tell where each defendant harmed you.
 - (5) **Why they did it.** If you know, tell the court why each defendant harmed you.

Explain the “who,” “what,” “when,” “where,” and “why” clearly and simply. Tell the story as if you are telling it to someone who knows nothing about what happened to you, but put only the important facts in your statement of the claim.

A short and plain statement helps the judge to review your complaint quickly and move onto the next step of your case. A long complaint will take a judge longer to review and understand, and the judge may tell you to rewrite it. This will delay your case.

You may find it helpful to look at the examples of statements of a claim in Attachment 2. Do not copy these examples or assume that the plaintiffs in these examples would win their cases. The examples show you how to write your claim, not what to say in your claim.

You may type or handwrite your complaint, so long as it’s readable.

If you cannot finish your statement on the complaint form, you may continue your statement of the claim on another sheet of paper.

C. **Why your case belongs in federal court (“Jurisdiction”).** State why a federal court can decide your case. There are two main possibilities.

(1) If your case involves a violation of federal law, a federal court can decide your case, and you should check the first box on the form. This box refers to a federal statute, 28 U.S.C. § 1331, the law that gives federal courts the power to decide cases involving the violation of federal law.

(2) If your case involves only a violation of state law, you may be able to check the second box. Generally, in order to check the second box, all the defendants must be citizens of a state other than the one of which you (and any other plaintiffs) are a citizen. In addition, more than \$75,000 must be in dispute.

- D. **Relief Wanted.** Your complaint should include a request for relief—what you want from each defendant, such as money or some particular action.
- E. **Jury Demand.** If you want to have your case decided by a jury, check “Yes” in the box provided. If you want the judge to decide it, check the other box.

What NOT to put in your complaint

DO NOT attach a lot of papers or long statements from witnesses. **If you want the judge to know about a fact, just write the fact in your complaint. The complaint is not the place for *proving* facts. When the judge needs proof, you will have a chance to submit it later.**

DO NOT include in your complaint lengthy quotations from statutes, laws, regulations, or cases. If you want, you may simply list the statute, law, or regulation that you believe the defendants violated. Later in the case, the defendants or the judge may ask you to explain in more detail why you think that the defendants have violated a law. You will then have an opportunity to quote from statutes, laws, regulations, or cases.

DO NOT include in your complaint unrelated claims against different defendants. You may bring the same claim against more than one defendant only if all of the named defendants played some part in the *same* situation that resulted in the alleged violation of your rights.

Note to employment-discrimination plaintiffs:

Before you file a lawsuit for employment discrimination, you are generally required to ask the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (or equivalent state agency) to address your claims. If you do not do this, the defendants may ask the court to dismiss your case and the court may do so.

Filing Your Complaint

To file your complaint, you must pay a filing fee. You should call the clerk's office to find out the current fee. (The phone numbers and addresses for the clerks' offices are listed below.) Send a check or money order in this amount, payable to "The Clerk of the U.S. District Court."

If you cannot afford the fee, you may ask the court for permission to file without prepaying the full fee. Use the form "Request to Proceed in District Court without Prepaying the Filing Fee" that is part of Attachment 1.

BE SURE to keep for yourself an exact copy of your complaint and any other document you send to the court.

DO NOT mail a copy of your complaint directly to any defendant.

Mail (1) your complaint and (2) your check or money order (if you can afford to prepay the full filing fee) or your Request to Proceed in District Court without Prepaying the Filing Fee to: "Clerk of the U.S. District Court" at the appropriate address listed below. Consult the attached map for help.

Northern District of Illinois

Chicago

Everett McKinley Dirksen U.S. Courthouse
219 South Dearborn Street
Chicago, IL 60604
(312) 435-5670

Rockford

Stanley J. Roszkowski U.S. Courthouse
327 South Church Street
Rockford, Illinois 61101
(815) 987-4354

Central District of Illinois

Peoria

309 U.S. Courthouse
100 N.E. Monroe Street
Peoria, IL 61602
309-671-7117

Urbana

218 U.S. Courthouse
201 S. Vine Street
Urbana, IL 61802
217-373-5830

Southern District of Illinois

Benton

301 West Main Street
Benton, IL 62812
(618) 439-7760

East St. Louis

750 Missouri Avenue
East St. Louis, IL 62201
(618) 482-9371

Northern District of Indiana

Fort Wayne

1300 S. Harrison St.
Fort Wayne, IN 46802
(260) 423-3000

Hammond

5400 Federal Plaza
Hammond, IN 46320
(219) 852-6500

Lafayette

Charles Halleck Federal Building
230 North Fourth Street
Lafayette, IN 47901
(765) 420-6250

South Bend

102 Federal Building
204 S Main St
South Bend, IN 46601
(574) 246-8000

Southern District of Indiana

Indianapolis

Birch Bayh Federal Bldg & U.S. Courthouse
46 East Ohio Street
Indianapolis, IN 46204
(317) 229-3700

Evansville

Winfield K. Denton Federal Building & U.S. Courthouse
101 Northwest Martin Luther King Boulevard
Evansville, IN 47708
(812) 434-6410

Terre Haute

U.S. Courthouse
921 Ohio Street
Terre Haute, IN 47807
(812) 231-1840

New Albany

Lee H. Hamilton Federal Building & U.S. Courthouse
121 West Spring Street
New Albany, IN 47150
(812) 542-4510

Eastern District of Wisconsin

Milwaukee

362 United States Courthouse
517 East Wisconsin Avenue
Milwaukee, WI 53202
(414) 297-3372

Green Bay

Jefferson Court Building
125 S. Jefferson St., Rm. 102
Green Bay, WI 54301-4541
(920) 884-3720

Western District of Wisconsin

Robert W. Kastenmeier U.S. Courthouse
120 N. Henry Street, Room 320
Madison, WI 53703
(608) 264-5156

ILLINOIS
7th Circuit



INDIANA
7th Circuit



WISCONSIN
7th Circuit



ATTACHMENT 1

COMPLAINT FORM

(for non-prisoner filers without lawyers)

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE _____ DISTRICT OF _____

(Full name of plaintiff(s))

vs

Case Number:

(Full name of defendant(s))

(to be supplied by clerk of court)

A. PARTIES

1. Plaintiff is a citizen of _____ and resides at
(State)

(Address)

(If more than one plaintiff is filing, use another piece of paper).

2. Defendant _____
(Name)

is (if a person or private corporation) a citizen of _____
(State, if known)

and (if a person) resides at _____
(Address, if known)

and (if the defendant harmed you while doing the defendant's job)

worked for _____
(Employer's name and address, if known)

(If you need to list more defendants, use another piece of paper.)

B. STATEMENT OF CLAIM

On the space provided on the following pages, tell:

1. Who violated your rights;
2. What each defendant did;
3. When they did it;
4. Where it happened; and
5. Why they did it, if you know.

[illegible]

C. JURISDICTION

☐ I am suing for a violation of federal law under 28 U.S.C. § 1331.

OR

☐ I am suing under state law. The state citizenship of the plaintiff(s) is (are) different from the state citizenship of every defendant, and the amount of money at stake in this case (not counting interest and costs) is \$_____.

D. RELIEF WANTED

Describe what you want the court to do if you win your lawsuit. Examples may include an award of money or an order telling defendants to do something or stop doing something.

E. JURY DEMAND

- ☐ Jury Demand - I want a jury to hear my case
OR
☐ Court Trial – I want a judge to hear my case

Dated this _____ day of _____ 20_____.

Respectfully Submitted,

Signature of Plaintiff

Plaintiff's Telephone Number

Plaintiff's Email Address

(Mailing Address of Plaintiff)

(If more than one plaintiff, use another piece of paper).

REQUEST TO PROCEED IN DISTRICT COURT WITHOUT PREPAYING THE FILING FEE

- ☐ I **DO** request that I be allowed to file this complaint without paying the filing fee. I have completed a request to proceed in the district court without prepaying the fee and attached it to the complaint.
- ☐ I **DO NOT** request that I be allowed to file this complaint without prepaying the filing fee under 28 U.S.C. § 1915, and I have included the full filing fee with this complaint.

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE _____ DISTRICT OF _____

Full name of plaintiff(s)

v.

Case No. _____
(Provided by the clerk of court)

Full name of defendant(s)

**NON-PRISONER REQUEST TO PROCEED IN DISTRICT COURT
WITHOUT PREPAYING THE FILING FEE**

Answer the following questions to the best of your ability.

Note: If you do not tell the truth, the court may dismiss your lawsuit.

I. Personal Information

- 1) Are you employed? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- 2) Are you married? ☐ Yes ☐ No
If "Yes," is your spouse employed? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- 3) Do you have any dependents that you are responsible for supporting?
☐ Yes ☐ No
If "Yes," list them below:

<u>Name or initials (for minor children only)</u>	<u>Relationship to You</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Amount of Support Provided per Month</u>
_____	_____	_____	\$ _____
_____	_____	_____	\$ _____
_____	_____	_____	\$ _____

II. **Income** - If you are married, your answers *must include your spouse's income*.
(When calculating income, include any wages, salary, rent, child support, public assistance, unemployment compensation, disability payments, life insurance payments, pensions, annuities, workers' compensation, stock dividends and interest, gifts and inheritance, or other money you receive from any source.)

1) State your total *monthly* wages or salary? \$ _____

2) Provide the name and address of your employer(s):

3) State your spouse's total *monthly* wages or salary? \$ _____

State the amount of money you have received from any other source in the last twelve months, such as the sources listed above. Please attach an additional sheet if necessary.

<u>Source of income</u>	<u>Amount</u>
_____	\$ _____
_____	\$ _____

III. **Expenses** - If you are married or have dependents, *your expenses should also include your household's expenses*.

(When calculating household expenses, you may include groceries, clothing, medical costs, utilities that are not included in your rental payments, transportation, and insurance.)

1) Identify the following amounts that you pay per month:

☐ Rent or ☐ Mortgage \$ _____

Car payment(s) \$ _____

Alimony or court-ordered child support \$ _____

Credit card payment(s) \$ _____

- 2) Do you have any other *monthly* expenses that you have not already listed?
☐ Yes ☐ No

If "Yes," list them below:

<u>Expense</u>	<u>Amount</u>
_____	\$ _____
_____	\$ _____
_____	\$ _____

- 3) What are your total *monthly* expenses? \$ _____

IV. Property - If you are married, your answers must *include your spouse's property*.

- 1) Do you own a car? ☐ Yes ☐ No If "Yes," list car(s) below:

<u>Make and Model</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Approximate Current Value</u>
_____	_____	\$ _____
_____	_____	\$ _____

- 2) Do you own your home(s)? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If "Yes," state the approximate value(s). \$ _____

What is the amount of equity (assessed value of residence minus outstanding mortgage balance) in the home(s)? \$ _____

- 3) Do you have any cash or checking, savings, or other similar accounts?
☐ Yes ☐ No

If "Yes," state the total of such sums. \$ _____

- 4) Do you own any other property of value, such as real estate, stocks, bonds, trusts, or individual retirement accounts (e.g., IRA, 401 k), artwork or jewelry?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If "Yes," describe the property and the approximate value(s).

- V. **Other Circumstances** - Describe any other financial circumstance(s) that you would like the court to consider when reviewing this petition.

I, _____, declare that I am the plaintiff bringing this complaint. I declare that I am unable to prepay the fee and that I am entitled to the relief sought in the complaint.

Date

Signature - Signed Under Penalty of Perjury

ATTACHMENT 2

Statement of Claim (Example 1)

Who

The plaintiff, Timothy Jones, worked for *HAL Corporation*, a computer manufacturer, at its *Chicago* area office from 2007 through 2013. On

Where

When

What happened

December 1, 2013, HAL Corporation fired Jones from his job because he is an

African American. As a result, Jones has suffered lost wages and

humiliation. Jones wants HAL to give him his job back and pay him lost

wages and damages for his suffering.

Why it happened

Statement of Claim (Example 2)

When
Where
Who
What happened
Why it happened
What else happened
What else happened
Why it happened

On *December 1, 2013*, while plaintiff Samantha Smith was driving her car in *Indianapolis, Indiana*, *John Steven and Clyde Davis*, both city police officers, *stopped her car*. The officers had *no reason* to believe that she had violated any law, but *they detained and questioned her* for an hour, embarrassing her as neighbors drove by. Before the officers allowed her to resume driving, they deliberately *shoved her into the hood of her car*. They did so apparently *because her son recorded the episode*. The excessive force caused a head injury that required medical treatment. Smith wants damages for the one-hour detention, her medical treatment, pain, and embarrassment.